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Race to the Top — Round 2 Issue Briefs

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NEW JERSEY: Why It Lost and What It Can Do To Win in Round 2

To assist policymakers in Round 2 of the Race to the Top planning process, we — Democrats for Education Reform, Education Equality Project, and Education Reform Now — are publishing a series of "Race Smarter" briefs, based on analyses of Round 1 applications, with the goal of informing states' efforts to compete successfully for the remaining $3.4 billion in Race to the Top funds. This memo provides specific analysis for New Jersey.

OVERVIEW

New Jersey received a total score of 387 points out of a possible 500, which ranked the state 18th out of the 41 states submitting applications for the first phase of Race to the Top (RTTT). Judging from its Round 1 scores, New Jersey appears to have at least a fighting chance of earning a Round 2 award.

The state, however, should be cautious about relying solely on its Round 1 peer reviewer ratings. Only the top 16 states in Round 1 (i.e., the finalists) received the added scrutiny of an in-person interview at which reviewers could probe areas of the state's application that were unclear or unconvincing. To the extent to which the state over-promised, and there do seem to be some areas in which this is the case, New Jersey's Round 1 scores may overstate its prospects of earning a Round 2 award.

The state lost the greatest number of points — 41.4 — on State Success Factors — receiving only 67% of the possible points in this category. On average, the 41 applicant states received 72% of the possible points in State Success Factors, and none of the 16 finalist states received less than 76%.

One key factor in New Jersey's poor performance in State Success Factors was the lack of a clear plan to translate the State Educational Agency structure into a system of strong and coordinated support for school district reform efforts. The change of governorship that coincided with the submission of the Round 1 application seemed to fuel such doubts among some reviewers.

There is also a second issue related to the state's ability to set ambitious goals for student achievement. While the state rightly touted significant gains on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), it did not detail its track record or future plans for increasing high school graduation and college completion rates.

ROUND 1 SUMMARY

Although the second round clearly will create a whole new scoring context, Round 1 results are the best available means to inform what New Jersey needs to do to compete successfully in Round 2. Below is a table summarizing reviewer results for New Jersey.

SELECTION CRITERIA	POSSIBLE POINTS	POINTS GIVEN NEW JERSEY	NET LOSS	BEST IN CLASS
A. State Success Factors	125	83.6	41.4	Delaware (119.4) Kentucky (113.6)
B. Standards and Assessments	70	65.8	4.2	Ohio (69.4) Florida (69.0)
C. Data Systems	47	27.2	19.8	Delaware (47) Tennessee (43.6)
D. Great Teachers and Leaders	138	101.2	36.8	Louisiana (122.2) Rhode Island (121.2)
E. Turning Around the Lowest-Achieving Schools	50	43.4	6.6	Washington DC (50) Illinois (49.4) Tennessee (48.0)
F. General	55	50.8	4.2	Washington, D.C. (54.8) Florida (53.8)
G. STEM	15	15	0	Only DC and LA did not receive full points (15) in this category
Total	500	387	113	

* TN had the highest score, with 444.2 points; DE, the other state to be awarded funds, received 454.6 points.

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One reason may be that this is an area — in contrast to its NAEP performance for grades 4 and 8 — in which the state has not excelled, particularly with regard to college preparation and completion gaps between white and minority students (African-American and Latino).

While African-Americans make up 15% of the state's K-12 student population, they represent at most 5% of those taking Advanced Placement (AP) classes. Latinos, who also make up 15% of the state's student population, represent only 6% of those taking AP classes. Moreover, there are huge racial gaps on the pass rates for the national AP exams, even for those students who get to take the classes. While 85% of white students pass the AP Language and Composition test, only 49% of Latino and 46% of African-American students do.

The cumulative result: approximately half as many African-Americans and Latinos in New Jersey (25 or older) hold a B.A. (20% and 15%, respectively) compared to their white counterparts (36%). It is clear that New Jersey's second round application must include a detailed, bold, and ambitious high school reform agenda with the goals of dramatically increasing college enrollment and completion rates for all students, with particular emphasis on Black and Latino students.

The state lost the second greatest number of points in the Great Teachers and Leaders category, receiving 101.2 of 138 possible points or 73%. This score is slightly above the 41-state average of 66%; however, only one of the 16 finalists had a score this low (Massachusetts, which came in 14th). The two top-scoring states in this area, Louisiana and Rhode Island, received 122.2 and 121.2 points, respectively.

The state needs a much more rigorous plan to evaluate teacher effectiveness. At least half of a teacher's effectiveness rating should be based on the academic growth of his or her students, as the top-scoring states both demonstrated. New Jersey also needs to detail its plan for how to more equitably distribute qualified and effective teachers. In its Round 1 application, the state put off all of its decisions on the specifics of its Great Teachers and Leaders plan to evaluate teachers, and gave responsibility for these items to the new governor, who is supposed to appoint a board that would develop the actual plan. The state needs to provide an update on the appointment of the board and specify its plans and timeline for implementation in its Round 2 application.

A low score on Data Systems also hurt the state's chances. Its score of 27.2 out of 47 possible points (58%) was one of the lowest in the first round; only eight states scored lower. The core problem is that the state has fully implemented only three of the 12 data elements required under the America COMPETES Act. Arguably the most important component — a unique teacher identifier, necessary for teacher evaluations based on student growth — has only been partially implemented. The state currently does not link K–12 student data with data related to college readiness or higher education outcomes. An accelerated schedule for fully implementing all 12 elements could significantly improve the state's chances for a Round 2 win.

We are somewhat surprised that New Jersey received such high marks in the subcategory "Ensuring successful conditions for charter schools" within the General category. In this subcategory, the state earned 36 of the possible 40 points, which puts it in the same general range as several states that are considered strongly supportive of charter schools — Washington, DC (40 points); Colorado (40 points); Florida (39 points); and Georgia (37 points) — despite the fact that state's charter school approval process is notoriously and perpetually bottlenecked and funding for charters, in comparison to traditional schools, is inequitable. This is an area in which we recommend the state disregard an inflated Round 1 score and instead ramp up its charter school expansion activities to strengthen its Round 2 application.

Similarly, we are surprised that the state received such high scores on Standards and Assessments, given that a significant number of students, and disproportionate proportion of Blacks and Latinos, take an alternative high school exam that is not aligned with the same high standards as the regular high school exam taken by students

in the highest performing schools.

SELECT REVIEWER COMMENTS

State Success Factors

The state needs a plan that has wider state-wide impact, specifies how the state will aid Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) in their reform efforts, and sets out clear and ambitious goals for improving high school graduation and college completion rates.

Reviewer 1: "The applicant articulated a thoughtful reform agenda aligned to the four education goals. The path to achieving its goal, however, lacks clarity and coherence. The expected outcomes for achievement and changes, as outlined in the plan, lack rigor due to clarity."

"It is unclear from the application, the necessary activities that will be planned to build the capacity of the leadership structure to better enable it to carry out the reform work."

"The State is currently working on the High School Redesign Initiative to raise graduation rates; therefore an analysis isn't included."

Reviewer 2: "The State does not include data or a narrative concerning college enrollment rates."

"The State's data system currently lacks capacity to measure and report 'adjusted cohort graduation rates.' The State, therefore, relies on estimating high school graduation rates, which, although high, have not changed over the years. As the State improves its data system, it is possible — if not probable — its graduation rates will decrease."

Reviewer 3: "For the unions, the most controversial part of the plan is section (D)(2)(iv), which requires that the LEA use teacher evaluations to inform actions regarding teacher compensation, tenure, removal, promotion, and other professional decisions."

Reviewer 5: "The dedicated RTTT team will have a project director with four managers reporting to the director. The four managers are training, finance, systems and turnaround. As was true with other answers in (A)(2), the answers given had little detail as to specific timelines, activities and persons responsible."

Great Teachers and Leaders

The state's entire proposal for evaluating teacher and principal effectiveness is promissory as it relies on a commission to spell out the exact variables to be used and their relative weights in teacher and principal evaluations. Moreover, there is no plan for evaluating teacher effectiveness based on student academic growth in high school. The state's plan for equalizing the distribution of qualified and effective teachers does not specify definitions for "high-minority" and "high-poverty" schools. All of these issues must be comprehensively addressed for successful competition in Round 2.

Reviewer 1: "The performance targets [for improving the effectiveness of teacher and principal preparation programs] as outlined are low as it relates to state-wide impact."

Reviewer 2: "The State will measure student growth for students in the 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. It is unclear how and if the State measures student growth for high school students."

"[The equitable distribution plan] also allows the State to put off the important issue of equitable distribution for a few years. In fact, the State approved its Teacher Equity Plan without a definition for high-minority and low-minority schools. The State's de-prioritization of equitable distribution is reflected throughout their plan."

Reviewer 3: "There is, however, no discussion regarding the measure of growth rates for grades nine through twelve."

"The Applicant will create and convene a state-level advisory committee for the design, review, and ongoing revisions of the evaluation system (New Jersey Education Evaluation Committee, or NJEEC). The advisory committee will be appointed by the new administration and will include leadership from the state and LEAs, as well as representatives from other stakeholders."

Reviewer 4: "No subgroup breakdown of state targets is provided. While the urgency of funding is clear, little evidence is offered to support the claim of sustainability, nor to address the challenges to statewide impact evident in the uneven LEA returns."

"The process by which the evaluations will inform tenure and promotion/differentiated opportunities warrants further clarification (e.g., the Professional Teaching Standards Board will develop guidelines regarding use of evaluation data for the differentiated opportunities, and alignment with RTTT criteria therefore remains unknown)."

Reviewer 5: "There was minimal discussion of how NJ plans to design and implement rigorous, transparent, and fair evaluation systems for teachers and principals that (a) differentiate effectiveness using multiple rating categories that take into account data on student growth (as defined in this notice) as a significant factor."

General

The state needs to squarely address the low rate of charter approvals over the past few years and put forth a plan to encourage new applications and expedite the approval of additional high-quality charter school slots, both through the expansion of existing high-quality charter schools and new start-ups.

Reviewer 1: "The percentage of charters approved in the past raises questions related to possible barriers from the State."

Reviewer 4: "The state has approved 30% of charter applications, though only 21% since 2005. Whether or not state conditions limit charter formation prior to application completion is not clear."

Note: All state applications, scores, and comments can be found here:
www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/phase1-applications/index.html